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ABSTRACT

Emerging literacy is a vital concern not only for whole language enthusiasts but also for all concerned with helping each child extend his or her individual literacy development. By avoiding a traditional, behavioristic, reductionist, readiness-oriented classroom, the primary school teacher provides a greater opportunity for creating a natural learning environment. Such an environment supports children's emerging literacy by highlighting developmentally appropriate activities related to the importance of play. This play-oriented context sends a message to children that the teacher understands and respects who they are and also values what they can do. With this foundation established, the teacher can extend play in specific ways to promote children's individual literacy learning. Sociodramatic play, dramatic activities, shared reading, reading aloud, and immersion are only a sampling of the creative ways in which a caring, knowledgeable teacher can support children's individual literacy learning. These and other developmentally appropriate activities must be a major part of the primary school classroom so that children are free to grow and develop in natural ways. (Forty references are attached.) (RS)

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Emerging Literacy: An Important Whole Language Concern

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The whole language philosophy has had a major impact on classroom instruction. In the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, teachers and administrators have been energetically learning about and applying whole language activities. Many of these activities are meant to support a child-centered environment, emphasizing programs that are literature-based and practices that are meaning-focused. Although these efforts are certainly supportive of the whole language philosophy, they do not, by themselves, represent a serious understanding of what whole language is about.

Compounding this problem are myths that are being perpetuated. Included are myths about skills, instruction, evaluation, learners, and becoming a whole language teacher. According the Newman and Church (1990, p. 20), these myths are demonstrated in a variety of ways:

> There are misconceptions about specific instructional decisions. There are over-generalizations that keep teachers from seeing what their students are trying to accomplish. There are orthodoxies that undermine students' learning. And there are large overriding myths that conflict dramatically with the theoretical underpinnings of whole language philosophy.

To develop a better understanding of whole language, educators must reevaluate their beliefs concerning children and how they learn. Of major importance is children's emerging literacy and how to nurture it during the primary school years. Supporting children's emerging literacy increases their chances of having successful experiences as developing readers and writers. Not surprisingly, teachers and administrators may have misunderstandings

about emerging literacy. Teale and Sulzby (1989) clarify aspects of this concept by discussing principles of literacy instruction for young children. Foremost is a recognition that children experience legitimate literacy learning during the preschool years and therefore need exposure to reading and writing activities that are developmentally appropriate for their individual growth. Thus, teachers do not have to wait until children are "ready" to learn, since virtually all children are able to engage in literacy learning. This perspective indicates a significant shift from a maturational emphasis to an instructional focus (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1991). Teachers, however, should not "shove the first grade program down a notch or two into the kindergarten or prekindergarten and expect it to work. Traditional, formal reading instruction typical of first grade is simply inappropriate for young children" (Teale & Sulzby, 1989, p. 5).

Entering School: A Traditional Experience

Regrettably, when children enter kindergarten, they are likely to experience traditional settings that negate their emerging developmental needs. These settings tend to focus on the use of reading readiness books, exposure to the alphabet in isolation, memorization of numbers in sequence, and, of course, preparation for readiness testing. In many school districts in the United States, readiness testing is administered in kindergarten and other standardized testing is used throughout the primary and upper-elementary grades. This type of assessment reflects a subskill or reductionist orientation which conflicts significantly with a natural learning environment. Such an overt mismatch of learning and assessment frustrates children while it provides inadequate information about their emerging prior knowledge,

understanding of complete stories, authentic writing, love of language, and other important growth patterns.

In a recent study, Freeman and Hatch (1989) focused on kindergarten report cards used in Ohio public schools and their relation to developmental theory. From the results of their analysis, the researchers concluded that (1) kindergartners are expected to achieve mastery in work habits and in math and reading readiness, (2) there is an emphasis on an academic kindergarten influenced by the behaviorist rather than the interactionist perspective, and (3) the marking systems negatively evaluate the young children. Although these findings are limited to Ohio, the literature of the field suggests that similar approaches are dominating in other parts of the United States (Davis, 1980; Moyer, Egertson, & Isenberg, 1987; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986; Webster, 1984).

What Do Children Need?

This trend toward external demands, however, is in direct conflict with children's emerging developmental needs, which reflect a yearning for constructing meaning in natural contexts. In addition, young children already possess a growing repertoire of literacy knowledge that is used in making sense of their world. According to Clay (1989), five year olds entering school have literacy skills, but they vary significantly among individuals. In observing these children, Clay (1989, p. v) found:

> One child knew a great deal about books; another had explored writing. One was proud of being able to recognize all the family names; another could write most of the letters of the alphabet. Some had clusters of

skills, and some had no experience in some of these areas. It was rare to find a child who did not have some literacy knowledge on entry to school.

Such observable behavior suggests that children have a natural zest for wanting to be literate and that emerging literacy is as individual as it is continuous. This perspective is dichotomous to the traditional view of readiness which implies that children reach a stage in development when they are suddenly able to write and read. Instead, literacy learning should be understood as a process that steadily builds on previous experiences. In a sense, emerging literacy keeps emerging (Clay, 1989).

The Importance of Play

This view concerning emerging literacy establishes the foundation for a success-oriented whole language classroom. Although classroom teachers possess a variety of pedagogical beliefs concerning language arts, whole language enthusiasts agree that children learn best in natural environments (Goodman, 1986). The most natural environment supports the concept of play as an important part of a young child's experience. Play is essential because it promotes children's social, affective, and cognitive growth (Leeper, Witherspoon, & Day, 1984; Scarr, Weinberg, & Levine, 1986). Through play, children express in natural ways their emerging view of the world as they comfortably engage in a variety of activities, such as drawing, coloring, pretending, using manipulatives, listening and responding to interesting stories being read aloud, becoming actively involved in storytelling, and creating their own stories. Paley (1981, 1990) believes that as children relate their own story creations to

story playing and storytelling, they engage in a social function that releases their fantasies into the richly imaginative classroom of social play. These and other developmentally appropriate activities help children to better understand their world, expand their oral language, develop a better sense of story language and story structure, and enjoy communication. As important, the children benefit from growing socially and emotionally with a community of peers.

In addition, play can enhance children's cognitive development. Bruner (1985) found that play is more effective than direct instruction in promoting children's concept development. Bruner's research suggests that children who play freely with creative materials are effectively able to solve subsequent problems related to these materials. According to the researcher, "Players generate more hypotheses and they reject wrong ones more quickly. Players seem to become frustrated less and fixated less. They are more interested in finding out and learning from their explorations than they are in obtaining rewards" (p. 603).

Wassermann (1992) also believes that serious play supports children's cognitive and creative development because it is grounded in the principles of experiential learning. These principles include: (1) Play is generative in that it stimulates children to create something new; play sanctions what is different. (2) Play provides opportunity for taking risks; these include risks of invention. (3) Play prevents fear of failure; standards of right and wrong do not exist, and errors are viewed as a strategy for learning more. (4) Play builds independence; autonomy develops as children engage in their own creations. (5) Play encourages children to be physically active; this activity helps learners to focus their

attention better.

A play environment needs the support of teachers and administrators who value children's individual emerging literacy. This valuing of what children can do encourages early success with literacy learning as it prevents an emphasis of paper-and-pencil tasks, isolated skill exercises, and other fragmented activities.

Promoting Children's Literacy Learning

A whole language classroom provides a variety of opportunities for supporting children's emerging literacy. The activities below are not intended as a fragmented bag of tricks. Instead, they should be considered in terms of their overall impact across the curriculum.

- Sociodramatic play can enhance children's awareness of the functions of literacy as the children engage in the drama of real life situations. Teale and Sulzby (1989) suggest that the teacher establish a dramatic play area, such as a travel agency or an airport. This setting could include travel posters, airline tickets, magazines, and other print materials. While adopting certain roles, children could make signs as well as write tickets, boarding passes, and phone messages. An important aspect of sociodramatic play is to set up the play area in relation to the theme being highlighted in the curriculum. Thus, for a unit concerning community helpers, a post office, doctor's office, or police station could be used. Written language would prevail in such a setting, as the teacher demonstrates varied uses of writing (if necessary) and the children develop their own scripts. According to Teale and Sulzby (1989, p. 12), "With such preparation, and with occasional praise and suggestions from

the teacher, the extent to which literacy becomes a part of this sociodramatic play can be remarkable."

- Dramatic activities are similar in intent to sociodramatic play. Vacca, Vacca, and Gove (1991) suggest a variety of dramatic activities for stimulating the imagination and for using language spontaneously and inventively. In dramatic play, children are free to express themselves in unstructured, spontaneous ways such as pretending to be an astronaut traveling to the moon. A more structured experience is creative drama which might require children to act out parts of a favorite story or event. For example, such folk tales as Little Red Riding Hood consist of a basic plot structure and easily understood characters which are appropriate for young children. To support this language context, the children and teacher can create and use props, scenery, and costumes. Pantomime is another type of dramatic activity, and it involves nonverbal communication to express meaning. Such poems as Walter de la Mare's "Some One," Theodore Roethke's "The Lamb," William Jay Smith's "Around My Room," and Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Swing" are filled with action and thus are useful for movement activities and pantomime. These and other action-packed poems appear in Livingston's (1989) Dilly Dilly Piccalilli: Poems for the Very Young. Other anthologies of children's poems appropriate for pantomime include Carle's (1989) Eric Carle's Animals, Animals and Prelutsky's (1983) The Random House Book of Poetry for Children.
- Shared reading also supports children's emerging literacy because it builds on the intimate bedtime story setting (Cullinan, 1987). According to Harste, Short, and Burke (1988, p. 346), children "need to read in an atmosphere that supports their initial reading experiences and encourages them to take risks and to make predictions based on meaning and structure as they read,

rather than focusing their attention on isolated aspects of the reading process." In shared reading, the teacher guides children in a read aloud activity concerning a book with predictable language. For example, Bill Martin's (1983) Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? and the Wright Group's Mrs. Wishy-Washy are among the many books for beginning readers that provide appropriate language patterns.

Although no magic formula or specific criteria are available for determining a book's level, Peterson (1988, 1991) suggests a process of examining how language patterns become progressively more complex in books for beginning readers. This process has merit for the classroom teacher who selects books in relation to children's individual literacy development. To arrive at a book's appropriate level, a variety of factors interact. These factors include narrative style, the extent to which illustrations support textual meaning, vocabulary, language patterns, and the link between content and children's personal backgrounds. Assigning books to levels is easy when teachers make comparisons with other books having similar characteristics. Peterson (1988, 1991) provides an extensive list of children's literature for young readers, ranging from Level 1 (for example, Bruce McMillan's (1988) Growing Colors) to Level 20 (for example, Margot Zemach's (1987) The Little Red Hen. She also provides two cautions:

> First, assigning a book to a level is no guarantee that the writing and illustrations are of high quality and worthy of a reader's attention. Good books must delight as well as instruct, inviting the reader to visit again and again. Second, beginning readers are interested in and capable of understanding books that are far more challenging than those they are able to read independently (Peterson, 1991, p. 136).

For shared reading to be a success, the teacher initially guides the children through a big book version (if available) by motivating them to focus on the title, cover, and illustrations. As the children make predictions, the teacher gives further encouragement by asking such questions as "What do you think is happening? What might happen next?" (Cullinan, 1987, p. 8) Then, he or she reads the story aloud while pointing to the words. When the children recognize predictable language, such as repeated phrases and sentences, the teacher encourages them to read these language patterns aloud. After the first reading, the children have opportunities to confirm or disconfirm their predictions, reveal their personal responses to the story, or become involved in other related activities. Afterward, the teacher rereads the story and motivates the children to become involved in choral reading of predictable language. Depending on the children's interest, a third rereading can take place with a greater focus on choral reading. Finally, the teacher places copies of the book in the library corner and provides classroom time for reading independently or with a partner. For individuals who need additional reading support, a tape recording of the story should be available in the listening corner. Harste, Short, and Burke (1988) also suggest variations of shared reading, and they include popcorn reading, partner reading, and choral reading.

- Reading aloud is a marvelous activity not only to be used as a part of shared reading but also to be considered a daily event throughout children's school experience. When teachers read aloud children's literature every morning and afternoon, they provide emerging readers with a solid beginning to each school day, and they give them a sense of transition as they leave school and bring their literacy excitement home. Trelease (1989, p.2) believes that

reading aloud is important for the same reasons parents and teachers talk with children: "to assure, to entertain, to inform or explain, to arouse curiosity, and to inspire--and to do it all personally, not impersonally with a machine. All those experiences create or strengthen a positive attitude about reading, and attitude in the foundation stone upon which you build appetites."

Reading aloud favorite books of both the teacher and the children creates an exciting literacy event, especially when the books selected concern personal topics (Sanacore, 1991). For example, if the topic of grandparents is being highlighted, the teacher initially motivates an active discussion about grandparents and great grandparents. After the children's interest and knowledge are activated, the teacher briefly introduces Tomie de Paola's (1981) Now One Foot, Now the Other, Helen Oxenbury's (1983) Grandma and Grandpa, Charlotte Zolotow's (1974) My Grandson Lew, or another favorite story about grandparents. This introduction helps the children to focus on the book's cover and illustrations so that they listen with an active mind that makes predictions, that links prior knowledge to the text, and that makes connections with other stories. When class discussion stresses these and other factors, emerging readers are better prepared to apply their literacy development to the read aloud experience. As the teacher reads the book, he or she effectively uses intonational patterns, such as pitch, stress, and juncture. Sulzby and Teale (1987) and Teale and Sulzby (1989) suggest that favorite books be read often to emulate parents' repeated readings in the home. Through the rereading of favorite books, young children have opportunities to explore the books with more insight and to develop their own independence as readers.

If the repeated readings are done poignantly, they stir children's

emotions and motivate them to select the books during free time in the classroom. Children are more likely to choose books that are read aloud if the books are readily available in the classroom library. Martinez and Teale (1988) found that kindergarten children who were read to on a daily basis selected those books more often during their free time than stories that were not read aloud. These researchers believe that young readers should experience a variety of books, including those consisting of narrative and expository text. Not surprisingly, providing emerging readers with different textual experiences is beneficial to their literacy development. For example,

1. Children develop flexibility in reading diverse text structures.
2. Such diversity supports an expanded context for solving problems and thinking critically.
3. Early exposure to exposition nurtures a foundation for ease and facility with content area reading.
4. Children come to realize that all types of reading materials can be functional, enjoyable, and challenging (Sanacore, 1991, p. 214).

• Immersion in reading and writing is an important extension of reading aloud and of its related classroom library. When children are stimulated to read and when they have easy access to books, they are more apt to immerse themselves in meaningful literacy learning. Immersion helps children fulfill an often stated truism: We learn to read and write by reading and writing.

One way of connecting the reading/writing processes is to have young readers enjoy an action-packed poem, such as Phyllis Halloran's "Busy," which appears in Carle's (1989) beautifully illustrated anthology entitled Eric Carle's Animals Animals. This collection of lively poetry and lyrical pieces stimulates children to act out or engage in pantomime activities representing

the actions of various animals. In the poem "Busy," a squirrel is actively involved in running, jumping, and eating. As the teacher reads this poem several times, children have opportunities to internalize and express meaning nonverbally by pretending to be the busy squirrel. Since "Busy" consists of repetitive language patterns, young children are comfortable taking risks as they attempt to read the poem. These emerging readers also enjoy responding in writing to such a poem. For example, they can write about what they liked best concerning the busy squirrel, or they might express how they felt when they pretended to be the busy squirrel. The children's writing will typically consist of scribbling and drawing as well as some letters, words, invented spellings, and sentences.

In addition to this reading/writing event, children should be immersed in a wide variety of books, and they should write for different audiences and purposes. Instead of writing only for the teacher, children enjoy communicating with their peers, parents, grandparents, family physician, dentist, and others. Virtually every child also benefits from writing activities that help "to express one's feelings; to narrate a fictional story or an account of a real event; to explain factual information; to describe a person, place, image, or impression; to persuade another to change an opinion or to influence the actions of others" (N.Y.S. Education Department, 1986, p. 16). The value of early writing experiences is that they extend previous literacy learning in a relaxed classroom where risk-taking is encouraged.

The success of reading/writing immersion, however, has much to do with the teacher's understanding of and guidance in the concept of approximation. Cambourne (1984) describes approximation as a link between young learners' oral language and their developing competence as readers and

writers. Children should not be expected to achieve perfection in literacy learning on their initial attempts. In a natural classroom setting that emulates the home environment, children are praised for taking risks and for persevering. Thus, approximations are rewarded rather than criticized.

One way of supporting children's approximations is to hold individual conferences about books so that emerging readers can show their delight as they demonstrate their growing literacy with a variety of stories. As the stories and text become more challenging, however, the children may articulate more approximations through miscues, focus less on meaning, and become frustrated. At-risk children will exhibit similar behavior. A positive response from the teacher is to highlight an interactive approach which helps individuals to use the three cueing systems. Thus, while a child is reading, the teacher conducts a running record of the child's use of the semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic cueing systems. Repeated readings of the same text provide opportunities to observe shifts in the child's strategies for grasping meaning, textual structure, and visual information. Thus, observations of the child's reading and comments noted on the running record give the teacher a sense of direction in guiding the child to deal independently with more challenging text. This transition to more difficult material is facilitated when the teacher judiciously poses questions related to the cueing systems: Does it make sense? Does that look right? Can we say it that way? What would you expect to see? (Clay, 1985) The questions asked depend on the strategies the young reader does or does not employ as he or she is engaged with specific parts of the text. Since helping children become independent, strategic readers is a major instructional goal, the teacher minimizes questions and comments so that these learners develop experience

with making predictions, constructing meaning, and monitoring their own progress (Short, 1991).

A similar sensitivity to the concept of approximation should be demonstrated toward process writing. As young children write, they experiment with language that is matched with their individual literacy development. In addition to scribbling and drawing, these emerging writers use letters or clusters of letters to represent words. These invented spellings range from prephonic forms to letter-sound links to vowel transitions to traditional orthography. For, example, if a child is writing a story and is attempting to spell the word <u>feet</u>, he or she may write <u>FT</u> (pre-phonic) or <u>FET</u> (letter-sound correspondence). During later stages of development, the child may write <u>FETE</u> (vowel transition) or <u>FEET</u> (conventional orthography) (Morris, 1984). Not surprisingly, pieces of writing will show a range of spellings for a given word until the child has experienced the word in a variety of settings, including books, language experience charts, bulletin board displays, peer group discussions, and subsequent writing immersion. The important point to be made here is that invented spellings are developmentally appropriate and that they should be supported by teachers, administrators, and parents. The importance of invented spellings should be reinforced at faculty meetings, staff development sessions, PTSA gatherings, and parent-teacher conferences.

Summary

Emerging literacy is a vital concern not only for whole language enthusiasts but also for all concerned with helping each child extend his or her individual literacy development. By avoiding a traditional,

behavioristic, reductionist, readiness-oriented classroom, the primary school teacher provides a greater opportunity for creating a natural learning environment. Such an environment supports children's emerging literacy by highlighting developmentally appropriate activities related to the importance of play. This play-oriented context sends a message to children that the teacher understands and respects who they are and also values what they can do. With this foundation established, the teacher can extend play in specific ways to promote children's individual literacy learning. Sociodramatic play, dramatic activities, shared reading, reading aloud, and immersion are only a sampling of the creative ways in which a caring, knowledgeable teacher can support children's individual literacy learning. These and other developmentally appropriate activities must be a major part of the primary school classroom so that children are free to grow and develop in natural ways.

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